Sketch

Volume 39, *Number* 3 1974 *Article* 6

Nostalgia

Shelley L. Smith*

*Iowa State University

Nostalgia

Shelley L. Smith

Abstract

I GUESS I was around 9 years old when my parents first started to fight. My father worked the 3 to 11:00 p.m. shift as a pressman for the Penn Publishing Company, so the arguments were always late at night...

W. C. JUMPER AWARD

Nostalgia

by Shelley Lee Smith
Journalism and English, Senior

I GUESS I was around 9 years old when my parents first started to fight. My father worked the 3 to 11:00 p.m. shift as a pressman for the Penn Publishing Company, so the arguments were always late at night. At first, I was fascinated. My bedroom was upstairs and when the noise woke me up, I would sneak down the stairs and squat on the first step close to the door and listen. It was interesting to hear the old man's voice, for I rarely heard him say more than five words at a time, unless he'd been drinking. Sometimes he'd stop at the bar after work and "have a couple with the boys." This irritated my mother. "You're only thinking of yourself," she would say. "None of the other women in the neighborhood have to sit at home while their husbands run around. We haven't gone anywhere together since we were married. I'm a human being too, you know." She was always telling him that she was a human being. "Barb, where can we go at 11:00 at night?" he'd say. "None of the guys in the neighborhood have to work nights. For God's sake be reasonable."

"You don't have to work nights either. You just don't like being around your family. They're your kids too, you know."

"I know. And I also know they don't have to go to any goddamn private school. Just tell me this, how are we supposed to pay for it unless I work nights? Just answer that one if you know it all, wonderwoman."

"We can afford your booze but not the kids' school, is that it? I thought you wanted them to go to a Catholic school. It wasn't my idea to send them. As a matter of fact it wasn't even my idea to become a Catholic when we married. As I recall it was Papa Berger's idea. Or am I wrong about that too? Well, am I? What's your father gonna say if we send them to public school?"

"Alright, alright. You win Barb."

"Look, I'm not trying to win. It's just that we're not a family. We never have been. Your kids don't even know you. I can't be everything to them. They need a father."

"What do you want from me? I've told you a hundred times, when I build up some seniority, they'll put me on days."

II

My father never did go on the day shift. And my mother was right about one thing. We didn't know father at all. The only time I remember spending any time with him was on a vacation we took when I was 12.

My mother had talked Father into buying a camping trailer so we could travel "like other families." I can't remember who decided on the Black Hills. I think it was my mother. Anyway, it was to be a spectacular affair. We were going to stay in a really fancy trailer park equipped with a swimming pool, horse trails, electricity, a laundromat, miniature golf, and a recreation center where you could meet the other campers and play ping-pong or pin ball or other assorted games. That's what the brochure said. I got out of school a couple days early to go, and that was the best thing about the whole trip.

When we arrived, stiff and exhausted from riding six in a Ford Fairlane for eight hours, the swimming pool was empty, the electricity wasn't hooked up, the trails were overgrown, the stables empty, the recreation center was locked, and there wasn't another camper in the whole court. We'd started early to beat the crowds, and we had. It was so early that all the trailer courts were closed because the tourist season hadn't even begun yet. We decided to make a go of it despite the fact that we couldn't use the portable TV. After all, there was still the scenery.

It started to rain the evening of our arrival, and it was raining when we left. The six of us spent most of six days inside an 8 by 17 foot trailer. We grew tired of playing cards and tic-tac-toe. My youngest brother, Stevie, was

just beginning to crawl. He crawled into the oven. He crawled into the closet. He almost crawled into the chemical toilet, but I grabbed him just in time.

I spent a lot of time taking care of my younger brothers and sister. And my father made the job more difficult. He always seemed to make the baby cry. He'd pick Stevie up and mutter awkardly, "coochie, coochie, coo" or some such nonsense with a feeble smile, and Stevie would answer with a wail. "Take care of your brother, Alice," Mother would say. As I spent more time with my father, I decided that I didn't like him.

The fifth day of our vacation, during a temporary lull in the rain, my father went out in the car alone. I figured he'd gone to a bar. He returned in a couple hours and announced that he had a surprise for us kids. He whispered something to Mother and then told Judy and Mark and me to get in the car. We drove away leaving Mom and the baby behind. During the ride I pestered my father to tell me what the surprise was. "You'll see, you'll see," was all he'd say. After an unendurable twenty minutes, we arrived at the foot of Mount Rushmore. "But we've already seen this," I wailed. "Keep your shirt on, lady," he said. "Howdya like to ride in that little piece of machinery?", he said pointing to the gray sky. I looked up, and sure enough, there was a helicopter hovering overhead. I was ecstatic. "Wow, can we really? Look, Judy, we're gonna ride in a real helicopter," I said to my sister who was already jumping up and down eagerly. Mark, who was five, just stared at us.

The copter landed, and the pilot motioned us toward him, but Mark hesitated. His face was pale and my father dragged him limp to the copter. He was scared to death. Judy and I had already scrambled into the cockpit. By this time, Mark was screaming. Everyone attempted to coax Mark into the cockpit. "It's not scary, Mark. Don't be a chicken. Come on. Get in," Judy said. But Mark only tried harder to get out of Father's grasp. When Mark started to bite, I said, "Aw, let 'em stay if he wants to."

But by now it was a matter of pride with Father. "No son of mine's gonna be a sissy," he shouted, as he scooped

Mark up and stuffed him into the cockpit. Mark screamed all the more. "Hold onto 'em, Alice," father ordered. The pilot shouted over the bawling that he didn't think this was a good idea. I agreed. But father screamed, "Hogwash, he'll shut up when you get in the air. Who's pay'en for this anyway?" So the pilot took off. Father was right. Mark did shut up as we rose. He curled up in a ball and whimpered. And then he threw up, all over the pilot and me. The helicopter ride lasted less than three minutes.

Next morning, my father, not to be defeated by yesterday's events, announced we were going to see some "real, live Indians." We all piled into the car and drove and drove and drove through the drizzling rain. We found a sign, "SIOUX INDIAN RESERVATION", but we couldn't find any Indians. After three hours my mother said, "Phil, let's go back." But father was determined. We drove until it was too dark to see anything. But we never saw an Indian. After dusk my father turned around, drove back to the camp, hitched up the trailer, and we headed home. After the Black Hills fiasco, my father never took another vacation. He worked 3-11, 52 weeks a year and the trailer sat by the side of the house.

III

When I was in high school, my mother got a job. It was peculiar. I mean, my mother began to divide up everything in the house—the TV, the sofa, the roast beef—into "Hers" and "Father's" depending upon whose money had paid for it. Money became a major issue in the arguments. I had lost interest in eavesdropping by this time. In fact, I was irritated because the noise kept me awake at nights. Sometimes I blamed my father for drinking, and sometimes I blamed my mother for nagging.

I didn't really become involved until the arguments became violent. The first night Father hit mother, she came crying upstairs. She sat in a chair nursing a black eye all night. I sat up with her. They patched that argument up the next day. Things were quiet for awhile.

But one night, when I returned from a babysitting job, a police car was pulling away from our house, and my father was in the back seat. I ran in the house and found Mark crying on the sofa. Judy was sitting beside him. "He had to call the police," she said, looking at Mark. "It was really bad. Mother's in the hospital."

It didn't get any better. The cops became frequent visitors at our house. My mother talked about divorce. For years, she talked and talked and talked. Periodically, my parents would attempt a "reconciliation." They went to see the priest. They went to a marriage counselor. They even went to a psychiatrist. But it would always end in a brawl.

I hated my father for his violence, and I hated my mother because she wouldn't divorce him. I especially hated the "family meetings" we had every few months when my mother would announce another plan for "saving the family." It was so hopeless that Judy and Mark and I could hardly keep from laughing at these gatherings.

I couldn't wait to get away from home. The first year I was in college, I never went home. I felt guilty about leaving my brothers and sister, but I was helpless, I told myself. Things at home got worse and worse. One night, my sister called to tell me that she'd found a pistol in mother's purse. I told her to get rid of it right away. But it was too late. That night, as my father raised his hand to hit her, my mother raised the pistol and pulled the trigger. The gun didn't go off. But my mother realized that she had become capable of murder. She got a lawyer the next day.

IV

I didn't see my father until two years after the divorce. My mother began to go out with other men. I probably never would've seen him, except for the accident. I wasn't hurt too badly, but I had a huge hospital bill and no insurance. The nurse looked at my records and noticed that my father worked at Penn Publishing. She

knew they had a family insurance plan at the company, so she called him.

When my father walked into my hospital room, I was astounded. I just stared at him until he muttered, "Hello. How're ya feelin?" "OK", I mumbled. He sat down on the edge of the bed, self-consciously, and started to speak, then stopped, got up, walked over to the window, stood there for a minute and walked over to the end of the bed. He pulled a card out of his wallet and handed it to me. "Here, it's my Blue-Cross-Blue Shield card. Since you're still in college, it covers you. Just give it to the nurse." He started for the door, turned and said, "Hope you're back on your feet soon." He walked over and kissed me on the head and then nearly ran out of the room.

V

When I got out of the hospital, I decided to return the insurance card personally. My father lived in an old apartment near Penn Publishing. The paint on the outside of the building was cracked and peeling. I pressed the doorbell, but it made no sound. I knocked softly, then hard on the door. I heard footsteps. I couldn't think of anything to say, and I wondered why I had come. The door opened, and I looked at my father's haggard face. "Um, well, I just came for a visit," I said. "Oh, yeah? Come on in, come on in," he responded. "Why didn't you use the doorbell?" "I did," I said as I walked in, "but I guess it's broken." "It is? Oh well, I don't get much company these days. I guess I didn't know it was broken. I'll fix 'er up tomorrow." He seemed to be apologizing. "Sit down," he said indicating an old stuffed chair in the middle of the tiny living room. There was a bed in the corner of the room, and a television set on a stand at the foot of the bed. The room was bare and dingy, but clean. There was a dead plant on the sill of the tiny window.

We sat for awhile trying to think of things to say. Finally, Father offered me a drink. I hesitated but

decided it was a good idea. Father went into the kitchen to fix the drinks, while I gazed around the room.

On the wall beside the bed there was a bulletin board. I walked over to examine it. There was a dentist appointment card and a bill from Joe's Garage tacked on the board. My high school graduation picture, ripped and dusty, was tacked in the corner. Next to it was a yellow newspaper clipping about Papa Berger's funeral. There was another newspaper clipping with the names of those who made the dean's list at the university. My name was underlined. There were old snapshots of Mother, Judy, Mark and Stevie.

The last picture looked vaguely familiar. I pulled it off the board and rubbed the dust from it's surface. It was a picture of the entire family posed in front of the trailer in South Dakota. Father returned with the drinks as I was putting the picture back in its place. He handed me my drink and then looked at the picture, conspicuous because of its clean surface. "That's my favorite," he said. "Remember when I talked that bartender into coming by and taking that picture of us? Boy, we sure had some grand times back then. Back in the old days. I've thought of going back, but I dunno, I don't s'pose it'd be the same would it?" he asked.

I took a drink. It tasted like cheap wine.